

Understanding Imitation in Second Language Acquisition

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第二言語の習得上で理解する模倣

要 約

第二言語の習得にあたり、言葉を真似るという勉強法は何十年にも亘り根付いているが、その活用方法も近年、変わってきている。実際、この勉強法を活用するか否かということはSLAにおいて理論上、重要な役割を占めています。また、この勉強法は二十世紀において、第二言語習得者に与えた影響も少なくないといえよう。近年、特に今世紀最初の十年に新しい取り組みがL2習得者の中で、「模倣」いわゆる真似る規則というものが確立されつつあり、その大半が総合的な機能を果たす社交文化的アプローチという理論に基づいたものに影響を受けているといえる。また、最近は「模倣」による表現を使ったSLA研究にも注意が向けられている。この論文はそれらをより詳細に分析するもので、「模倣」を使った表現とこれらの研究において、歴史的にも、過去に最も注目された研究(2000-2010)を詳細に分析したものである。これらを総合的に考察することでSLAでの全体的な取り組みと「模倣」の研究が理論を構築する上で中核に位置し、且つ、普及していることが読み取れる。最後にこれらの「模倣」というメソッドはこれまでも研究されてきたものであり、それ自体に多くの可能性があることを意味し、また研究分野として新しい議論を呼べるものである。

キーワード：模倣、第二言語の習得、社会文化理論、プライベートスピーチ、復誦

Key words: imitation, second language acquisition, sociocultural theory, private speech, repetition

Introduction

Recently, imitation seems to be drawing new interest in adult second and foreign language learning research, both because of the influence of other fields like evolutionary biology and neuroscience (see Lantolf's (2006) discussion of Meltzoff (2002)), as well as the growth of interest in sociocultural learning theories during the past decade which, drawn from the work of Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky, maintain an important role for imitation in the learning and ultimate internalization of language. Nevertheless, the term "imitation" has long historical roots in foreign language learning, so understanding how this term is defined now and how it relates to other similar and related terms used in second language acquisition research and teaching is important. The purpose of this paper is to give an overview of how imitation is being defined and studied in recent adult second language acquisition research in foreign and second language contexts.

Imitation has long been a concept of study in biosciences and psychology as well as in children's first language acquisition, but imitation's importance in adult second language acquisition research has largely been disregarded since the shift from behavioral psychology's influence on the field in the 1950s (see below for discussion). Nevertheless, due to the aforementioned recent resurgence in imitation, this paper takes view of recent research, studies within the past decade (i.e., 2000–2010). This paper concludes with a critical discussion of potential areas for research on imitation in adult foreign language learning contexts.

Defining imitation and related terminology in foreign and second language learning

The word "imitation" can have a loaded meaning in foreign language learning context. Perhaps the most notable use of the term "imitation" as it relates to language learning was in behavioral psychology through the work of B. F. Skinner. This view of imitation was simple in that language learning (mother tongue) was thought to occur through the imitation of proficient language speakers, as might happen with a child and his or her mother. This concept of language learning was largely discredited by Chomsky's criticisms in the late 1950s (Chomsky 1957, 1959), which contended that there was not nearly enough input from parents or proficient language speakers to account for children's impressive ability to acquire their first language. As Chomsky's contention became generally accepted among most academics, the strictly behavioral concept of imitation in language learning disappeared. Nevertheless, Chomsky's model of language acquisition offered little meaning for the concept of imitation as he claimed that language developed

largely because our minds were built for language. Thus, imitation as an explanation for language learning was a side note to the more important consideration that our minds have a natural internal structure that allows us to become proficient language users from a young age. The reemergence of a more complex concept of imitation can be linked to the popularization of social-interactionist SLA theories in the late 1970s and early 1980s. As imitation is an interactive and social process, its importance once again began to be discussed. This particularly became true with the advent of sociocultural theories of second language acquisition that stem from the theories of Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky. For Vygotsky, imitation was an importance construct in explaining how learners acquire language, and thus proponents of Vygotskian approaches to second language acquisition also see imitation's relevance. There exist thorough descriptions of the sociocultural concept of imitation in relation to SLA (Lantolf, 2006; Lantolf & Thorne, 2006). Here, the main points of the concept will be summarized so it can be contrasted with other descriptions of imitation in the literature. It is important to note that most of the foreign language learning studies in the past decade have conceptualized imitation in its sociocultural sense.

A starting place for understanding imitation in sociocultural theory is Lantolf and Thorne's (2006) concise comparison between imitation, emulation and mimicry in their relation to the goal of the imitated activity is most helpful. The authors distinguish the three as follows:

"Central to imitation is understanding the goal and the means through which the activity is carried out. This distinguishes imitation from emulation, where the goal is recognized but the means is not. Human children are thus able to match the goal and the means of achieving some activity (imitation), while other primates, such as chimps, are able to recognize the goal of an activity without understanding the relevance of the means (emulation). Both imitation and emulation are distinguished from mimicry by virtue of the fact that in the latter action an understanding of the goal is also absent." (p. 167)

This concept of imitation implies that when one truly imitates in a foreign language context, one is not simply repeating a phrase or linguistic convention, but rather, one understands why (or is soon to understand why) such a phrase or linguistic convention is used. Thus, imitation is a kind of knowing. According to Lantolf (2006), evidence of imitation can be found in *private speech*, also a term connected with sociocultural theory. In the foreign language learning context, private speech refers to audible speech produced by learners that is not directed toward others, but rather toward themselves. The ultimate

result of this imitation through private speech is internalization of language, the basic goal of foreign language learning. Within this concept, then, it is important to note a few things. First, private speech is key evidence for the presence of imitation. As can be seen in most of the current research on imitation in foreign language learning (reviewed below), most studies focus on the presence or absence of instances of private speech. Second, if the learner does not understand the “goal and means” (how the language is used) then they are not engaging in imitation (or we cannot determine whether they are or not). On this point especially the sociocultural construct of imitation is fundamentally different from the behavioral construct of imitation (which still appears in applied linguistics discourse as will be seen below). The sociocultural construct of imitation allows researchers to distinguish between what behaviorists might have called imitation (socioculturalists would call it “emulation” or “mimicry” perhaps) and true imitation which involves deep knowledge and agency on the part of the learner. A concrete and practical example of how this might be relevant in a foreign language classroom is if an instructor were to engage students in a grammar drill. Viewing imitation socioculturally researchers should be able to classify language use by learners in a foreign language classroom into different types. For example, if an instructor asks learners to do grammar drill exercises, they might try to discover when learners are doing more than just mimicry or emulation. They might look for evidence by recording the private speech of learners and then doing subsequent follow up research on whether the private speech was actual evidence of language internalization and acquisition.

Continuing the discussion of sociocultural imitation, a further aspect of imitative behavior to be considered is that of non-verbal communication. McCafferty (2008) contends that gesture or other non-verbal communication should not be disregarded as unimportant even in foreign language learning situations, and he discusses the term “mimesis” (p.148) to describe the significance of gesture acquisition in L2 learners. McCafferty largely defines mimesis through the sociocultural construct of imitation, thus, mimesis basically equals imitation of non-verbal behavior. However, he also makes the point that at least in second language acquisition (SLA) studies have seemed to lack attention to non-verbal imitation, so the specific focus on non-verbal communicative aspects of SLA seems warranted (indeed, this review finds no other studies discussing the acquisition of gesture through imitation in second or foreign language learning during the past decade).

Use of the term imitation: a survey of the *Modern Language Journal* 2000–2010

Imitation as a concept in Vygotskian sociocultural theories of learning is well-defined, and has received the most attention in recent SLA literature. Interestingly, other theoretical

uses of the term “imitation” or related morphological forms (i.e., imitate, imitative, etc.) do not appear to be so widespread. While surveying every instance of the word imitation in the SLA literature from the past decade is not possible nor feasible here, the use of the word in one prominent journal focused on second and foreign language acquisition, The Modern Language Journal (MLJ), is examined (book reviews, references, and annual MLJ reports of doctoral degrees granted are excluded). Table 1 lists each article containing the word “imitation” (and/or related morphological forms), the number of times it is used, how it is being used, and the theoretical background of the usage, in MLJ articles from 2000–2010.

Use of the word imitation: MLJ 2000–2010

Article	# of uses	how “imitation” was used	theoretical background of usage
Su (2010)	1	“...thus, the goal of language teaching should not be producing imitation native speakers but multicompetent language learners/users who can mediate between two languages, using both when appropriate (Cook, 1999).” (p.99)	behaviorist
Thorne & Black (2009)	1	“The ZPD is defined as the difference between what an individual (or group) can accomplish independently and what the, same individual (or group), through imitation and assistance, can accomplish in joint activity (e.g., Kinginger, 2002; Lantolf & Thorne, 2006; Vygotsky, 1978).” (p.806)	SCT
Marsh & Tainio (2009)	9	(selected occurrences) “Repetition and imitation have long been recognized as central to the processes of both first and second language acquisition and learning.” (p.154) “This research highlights the need to view repetition and imitation in terms of goal-oriented, intentional strategies that lead to innovative behavior (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006; Tomasello, 1999, 2003; see also Vygotsky, 1986)” (p.154)	SCT
Garrett & Young (2009)	1	“She experienced difficulty in discerning sounds and producing unfamiliar sounds that the instructor wanted the class to imitate.”	normal use/ phonology
Kinginger (2008)	1	this paper quotes a study abroad student angered because her host family “imitates” her French accent	normal use/ phonology
Hu, (2008)	1	not important (discussing L1 phonological imitation for learning words)	normal use/ phonology
Van Geert (2008)	1	“...and, finally, a direct social component that accounts for the ‘contagiousness’ of the actions of others and their impact on the actions of the person through imitation. A person’s goal relates to?but is not the same as—an attractor in the state space as described earlier.” (p.187)	normal use
Sagarra & Alba (2006)	1	talking about phonological imitation to create word association between foreign language words and native language words to help remember vocabulary	normal use/ phonology
Kramsch (2006)	1	historical negative reference to imitation in audiolingual methods	audiolingual

Schulz (2006)	1	"Considerable instructional time is devoted to so-called <i>skill-using</i> activities performed in small groups of learners, such as simulations, role play, or other task-based activities imitating real-life language use. Communicative approaches do not specify a content." (p.252)	communicative method
Trofimovich & Gathbonton (2006)	1	discussing elicited imitation	elicited imitation
Oller (2005)	2	discussing infant L1 imitation used to learn new content in their environment	infant L1 imitation
Davis (2005)	2	normal literary usage of imitation	normal use/ literary
Dewaele (2005)	1	Reporting on Naiman, et. al's (1978) "Imitation Test" p.372	elicited imitation
Valdes (2005)	1	discusses development of immigrants' dialects through imitation of high or low prestige varieties	normal use/ phonology
Ayoun (2004)	3	refers to an older study being imitated	normal use
Silva & Leki (2004)	1	refers to L2 writing pedagogy imitating models for writing from applied linguistics and rhetoric	normal use
Arteaga, Herchensohn, & Gess (2003)	1	uses imitated inconsequentially in the abstract in discussion of a pedagogical procedure for learning morphological form in French through a phonological exercise	normal use/ phonology
Duff, Wong, & Early (2002)	1	normal use of the word (quotes a student discussion about the observation of another person)	normal use
Way, Joiner, & Seaman (2000)	1	imitating in writing..."This study supports the inclusion of more in-context vocabulary and more authentic, level-appropriate prose models to read, to analyze, and subsequently to imitate." (p. 179)	normal use
Arteaga (2000)	1	discussing students being good at "imitating" pronunciation based on their attitude about having a foreign accent	normal use/ phonology

As can be seen from in Table 1, from the years 2000–2010, 21 different articles from *The Modern Language Journal* employ the term imitation or a derivative form, but its use as an SLA term occurs in less than half of the articles. Authors use of the term imitation with its normal meaning or in reference to the phonological imitation of sound (non-SLA specific meanings, in these cases) equal 13 instances. Besides these, there are a few historical references to theoretical frameworks (1 to behaviorists' 'imitation'), teaching methodologies (1 each to audiolingual and communicative methods), to testing methods (2 to elicited imitation), to infant L1 learning(1), and finally to Sociocultural Theory (2). Of these, only one of the articles defining imitation through Sociocultural Theory (SCT) uses the term imitation repeatedly throughout the paper.

While it's not possible to extrapolate from this narrow survey to the bulk of recent SLA research, this look at this one prominent SLA journal indicates that the use of the theoretical term "imitation" is not widespread, and it is only spoken of theoretically in historical context or in relation to SCT. As SCT specifically includes imitation as a central construct, this should perhaps come as no surprise. The only surprise might be that a term

so obviously linked with L1 acquisition has found very little hold in L2 acquisition studies.

This mini-survey of how often “imitation” occurs in overall SLA research is meant to give some overall perspective on the pervasion (or lack of) of the term. However, the next section focuses on the more significant question of how imitation has been studied in recent research (2000–2010) from all SLA literature where it is the central construct of the study.

Recent research on imitation in foreign language learning

Table 2 : 2000–2010 studies with imitation as a central concern

Author (year)	Theoretical Frame
Sasaki& Takeuchi (2010)	sociocultural
Marsh & Tainio (2009)	sociocultural
Ding (2007)	undefined
Lantolf and Yáñez-Prieto (2003)	sociocultural
Centeno-Cortés (2003)	sociocultural
Ohta (2001)	sociocultural

Six studies in the past decade have included “imitation” as a central theme for their research. As has been mentioned, Sociocultural Theory (SCT) sees imitation as an important part of internalizing first and second language acquisition, so it is that five of the six studies to be reviewed here use the theoretical frame of SCT. One other study (Ding, 2007) does not clearly define the term “imitation”, but does include it as a central, important idea in the research.

Lantolf (2006, p.98–102) already provides a thorough and detailed review of three of the “imitation” studies: Centeno-Cortés (2003), Lantolf and Yáñez-Prieto (2003), and Ohta (2001). In all these studies, the focus of the research is on tracking the private speech of adult L2 learners to find out if such speech provides evidence of L2 acquisition. Both Centeno-Cortés (2003) and Ohta (2001) focus on the private speech of whole classes of L2 learners, of Spanish and Japanese, respectively, while Lantolf and Yáñez-Prieto (2003) focus on the private speech of one single Spanish as a foreign language learner. In all cases examples of private speech are found, though it is much less than what has been found with children who learn a foreign language. None of the studies specifically are able to show that the private speech-imitation examples conclusively lead to L2 acquisition.

Two other more recent studies also discuss imitation through the lens of SCT. Marsh and Tainio (2009) focus on participants’ repetition and imitation of sounds in video games. Marsh and Tainio’s primary focus is more on the function and meaning of repetition, but they often combine this with imitation and cite SCT literature on the impact imitation can have on language internalization. The authors claim that “repeating and

imitating meaningful chunks of language...enables the players to adopt them into their own repertoire so that the patterns may become available for recycling in other contexts" (Marsh and Tainio, 2009, p. 165). The authors go on to note numerous benefits inherent in such repetition and imitation including the engagement in collaborative language play and development of their membership in the community of game players.

Sasaki and Takeuchi's (2010) study of ten 14–15 year old English language learners involved in email exchanges with an English native speaker also took an SCT approach, and this study is distinguished by the fact that the researchers were looking for examples of imitation in written expression as opposed to verbal (all other studies reviewed here involved examination of oral discourse). Sasaki and Takeuchi tracked the lexical use junior high school participants in order to determine how much they imitated the discourse of their native speaker (NS) counterpart through their email exchanges. The researchers found that learners acquired new vocabulary but not conclusively due to imitation. Through interviews with students, it became clear that while imitation may have played a role in language acquisition, repetitive use of lexical items by the NS and exposure to words from regular English classes or other study also had an influence. Another concern about the importance of imitation in this particular study might be whether or not the learners' use of the NS's lexical items would actually constitute imitation from an SCT perspective. Would such use in fact be more than emulation or mimicry? This issue is not part of the scope of Sasaki and Takeuchi's study, but might be a central question when considering the concept of imitation from an SCT perspective.

A final study, Ding (2007), stands out in its approach to imitation for two main reasons. First, it is the one study in the past decade which does not take a SCT approach to the concept of imitation. Second, it quite specifically identifies imitation as a clear conduit to language acquisition. The study consists of data gathered from interviews with successful language learners who in this case are defined as students who had won or nearly won national Chinese speech and debate competitions. The sample size is quite small (3 winners), but there are strong claims for the beneficial aspects of text memorization and imitation from interviewees such as learning to "borrow the collocations and sequences for productive uses" (p. 277) and learn the "minute features of language" (p. 276). In addition, the benefits to pronunciation from "hearing his or her own voice" (p. 277), and finally the development of "a relatively good feel for English" (p. 277) are mentioned. Ding (2010, p. 279) suggests that such text memorization and imitation can "enhance noticing", and that new features of the language can be "transferred from the working memory to the long-term". Ding does go on to point out that these good language learners spent a great deal of time and effort at the text memorization and imitation work and that most students were not so dedicated. However, Ding concludes that "text

memorization and imitation have a legitimate place in second language education" (p. 279). This claim brings up a flurry of considerations and questions to be discussed, along with the prospects for future research on imitation, in the concluding section of this paper.

Conclusion

Imitation, mostly on the wave of interest in sociocultural theory (SCT), has brought new interest in its role in SLA. However, as seen here, apart from its examination as part of SCT, with the exception of Ding (2007), it seems that imitation is either not discussed or it is seen negatively for its historical role in largely disregarded SLA theories. Moving forward into the next decade, how can the concept of imitation be studied in new ways that might offer new insights into the process of second language acquisition?

In sociocultural research, the focus has largely been on the presence of private speech which by Lantolf (2006) is seen as key, recordable evidence of imitation. Thus, the process of carrying out this research involves audio or video recordings of learners as they are learning a language. This is difficult to accomplish, and for that reason, most of the students until now involve learners inside a classroom being recording during periods of instruction. Lantolf mentions the promise of the Multimedia Adult English Learner Corpus (MAELC), a project at Portland State University, as a possibly unprecedented source of video and audio data. Nonetheless, in general, this type of research is promising but heavily encumbered by the logistical and ethical restraints involved in recording and catching language learners' private speech. A key question that has yet to be addressed in the literature is whether practices like repetition and memorization can lead to the SCT concept of imitation. Ding's (2007) implicit claim was that learners became proficient in English through memorization and imitation. Are there methods by which learners can be given practice to become imitators while not necessarily reverting back to monotonous and decontextualized audiolingual or behavioral learning methods? Recent shifts in second language acquisition away from free communicative methods towards more focus on form reflect the desire to both give language learners a context and opportunity to produce language while not sacrificing form. Where might imitation have a role in these SLA goals?

The study of imitation in foreign language learning is perhaps just beginning to gain traction again among SLA researchers. The opportunities for research, where SCT-based or not, seem plentiful and promising. It is hoped that in the ensuing decade SLA researchers will take an opportunity to understand how this basic biological and psychological process, imitation, might be occurring in their respective learning environments.

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